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Pulp Dynamics: Author and Fan Exchanges in the American Pulps

Dierk Günther

Introduction

There is something extraordinary in the phenomenon of the American pulps of the early 20th century. Despite the fact that the majority of what was printed in the pulps was forgettable, if not outright rubbish, with no claim at all to being something like literature, it is an equally undeniable fact that the pulps were influential on popular culture, entertainment, and even literature.

Certain pop culture icons of the 20th century, such as Tarzan, Zorro and the Lone Ranger, were born in the pulps. Decades after the pulps, Hollywood, and many of contemporary TV programs, fully embraced and took over the fast-paced story telling style of the pulps: a set of narrative conventions that relied on delivering non-stop thrills and action. Movies such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) or Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) are examples of Hollywood's homage to the pulps.

Pulp writer Frank Belknap Long states that the "... literary standards [of pulp magazines] were not very high, and at their best they were miles below the standards set by magazines like *Harpers* and *Scribners*" (138). Nonetheless, the pulps did have an impact on literature. In pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*, H. P. Lovecraft revitalized and redefined with his cosmic terror tales the gothic horror genre that had become stale with outworn tropes such as vampires, ghosts, ghouls and werewolves. In *Weird Tales* Robert E. Howard created a new type of action adventure story and fantasy subgenre, which years after his death was named Sword & Sorcery. Howard's work, together with J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, defined the emerging and modern literary genre of fantasy.

Moreover, the pulps drastically changed the traditional ways literature was consumed. Reading had changed from formerly having been an entertainment form for an exclusive circle of an educated elite to being available to the general masses, who, thanks to a nationwide education and growing literacy, also had access to this form of entertainment. Urbanization

and changes in lifestyle introduced the concept of leisure time that needed to be filled with entertainment. Together with movies and radio shows, the hundreds of available pulp magazines were an affordable and highly popular form of entertainment. The new kind of readership that consumed the pulps also had an utterly different social and educational background than the former, traditional readership. Furthermore, they also had different expectations and approaches to the literature they consumed than traditional readers. In fact, literature itself was changing significantly.

The pulps generated not only this new breed of readership. They also originated a new sort of writer. These writers were paid by the number of words and wrote stories that catered to the tastes of this new readership. Many, if not most, pulp fiction writers regarded their work not so much as art or an expression of their personal philosophies and outlook on life, but as a commercial product that needed to sell and had to appeal to the tastes of their readers. However, among the mass of pulp fiction writers there were also writers with sincere literary ambitions, such as Ray Bradbury, H. P. Lovecraft and August Derleth, who, according to Frank Belknap Long, “went so far to believe that they were what used to be known as ‘literary men,’ or ‘Men of Letters’” (162).

The result of all these novelties—a new kind of readership and writers, a new way of consuming literature—was an intertwined network of relations and interactions between these groups. It is these interactions and their results which this paper will describe in the following.

Academia has long dismissed pulp fiction or pulp literature as a subject matter that is not worth its attention. In 2000, the fourth edition of the *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory* still defined pulp literature as “basically trash, or something very close to it”, which “includes pornography, poor Westerns, many novelettes, the lower forms of crime fiction and third-rate sentimental romances” (759). Serious academic research of pulp fiction is a relatively new field that began around 1998 with Scott McCracken’s publication *Pulp – Reading Popular Fiction* and Erin A. Smith’s *Hard-Boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* in 2000. Both publications, though, are problematic as the authors displayed only superficial knowledge of pulp fiction. Instead of delving into the forms pulp fiction takes and its deeper aspects, both publications concentrated only on the works of canonized pulp fiction writers.

The authors also did not bother to work together with the real pulp fiction experts – the pulp collectors' community. These are especially flaws, as in case of pulp fiction studies it is the collectors' scene and fandom, which delivered and continues to deliver the groundwork for academic research.

Very broadly speaking, a feature of fandom is that dedicated fans realize that there is more behind the subject matter of their interest. A look at articles in any fanzine in which deeper aspects of the fields of fans' interests are introduced and debated, gives amply proof of this claim. The problem with such traditional fan research is, that it lacks the training to fully explore the ideas and findings formulated in fanzines or discussed at fan conventions. The traditional fan research usually collects and establishes immense and highly useful databases, as well as suggests topics worth of deeper exploration but then does not continue to further pursue these issues or to connect the various points that become apparent in such data bases.

This also counts for the topic addressed in this paper, which explores the importance and further influence of the readers' columns found in any pulp magazine. Pulp fiction experts such as Robert Weinberg have in the past brought up the issue of the pulp magazines' readers' columns by focusing on their origins and development. The exploring of this topic though has never taken the form of a full paper, which combines all the related aspects of this matter to a full picture. Instead, the topic has up to now been presented in form of a puzzle, with important information found in small doses in various introductions or the afterword of unrelated publications that collect the works of more prominent pulp fiction writers, such as for example, the University of Nebraska's editions of Harold Lamb's historical fiction. Unfortunately, despite of being highly insightful, all the points made in such work have never been connected and no conclusions were ever offered.

This paper collects and evaluates the information gained from original sources (pulp magazines) and the work of established pulp experts such as Robert Weinberg and combines it with recent academic work done by Nicole Emmelhainz in order to show the influence and further implications of the pulp magazines' readers' columns. By doing so it will become evident that the readers' columns of pulp magazines were places of manifold dynamics: readers communicated with fellow readers; readers came in direct contact with writers and vice versa, writers communicated with fellow writers. The result of such

communication was a new kind of discourse as well as a new sort of literature criticism produced by the magazines' readers, which was more candid than the traditional literature criticism. Moreover, readers put themselves in charge of quality control by pointing out logic holes in stories and commenting on the stories' quality, or lack of it. Writers who came in contact with other writers via the readers' columns formed circles in which they debated literature and developed personal networks. Finally, the readers' communication that began in the pulp fiction magazines turned into organized fandom, which has become an essential part of the scene that includes fantastic literature and art.

In the following, as a first step, Nicole Emmelhainz's research about discourse communities and her observation that these discourse communities found their platform in the pulp magazines' readers' columns will be outlined. The next step consists of an analysis and discussion of the origin and development of the readers' columns of the American pulp magazines, and the dynamics that originated from these columns. Finally, the further results of the readers' columns in form of author and fan activities that originated in the columns but then were enhanced beyond the pulp magazines will be discussed.

Discourse Communities

Nicole Emmelhainz describes the groups in which such interactions take place as discourse communities. Such discourse communities are, according to Emmelhainz, a "group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated" (52). This definition fits the interactions between pulp writers, readers of pulp fiction and the editors of pulp magazines, who share a common interest in the mass entertainment pulp fiction and use given available channels for communication that will be described in the following.

By regarding the author connections that can be found among the pulp fiction writers as discourse communities, Emmelhainz makes an important observation for the pulps: literature has plenty of examples of literary circles or literary salons where writers share and discuss with fellow writers and readers their works in progress. One example for such a group are the Inklings, the gathering of young and aspiring writers around J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, who presented and debated in an Oxford pub their literary experiments.

Thus, E. Hoffman Price describes in his memoirs *Book of the Dead: Friends of Yesteryear: Fictioneers & Others* how pulp writers who wrote for the same magazines and who lived in the same town regularly met, discussed their work, and formed discourse communities in the definition of Emmelhainz.

Their participation in a literary discourse community did not mean that the members had met in person. These discourse communities were also established via letters, with one famous example being the group around H. P. Lovecraft that became known as the Lovecraft Circle.

Readers' Columns and Readers' Letters

The readers' columns of pulp magazines are the element that allowed all the author and fan exchanges that will be discussed here. The success of any pulp fiction magazine depended on its publisher's or editor's skills to understand the needs of their clientele. Readers' feedback gave the producers of pulp magazines a good idea of what worked for their purposes and what did not. Even before the readers' columns were introduced, the pulp magazines received such feedback in the form of readers' letters to the editors. Such discourse though was private. It took place only between the author and the editor, and these letters were not published in the magazine. The readers' columns in which the letters of readers were published, took this communication to an entirely new level.

The readers' corners had their beginning in *Adventure*, one of the leading pulp magazines. In May 1912, Arthur Sullivant Hoffman, the editor of *Adventure*, established a column called "The Camp-Fire." According to Hoffman "The Camp-Fire" was "a Meeting Place for Readers, Writers and Adventurers" (Goulart 28) and if one substitutes the word "adventurers" with "editors (of the magazine)," then the perfect image of the exchanges these readers' columns made possible emerges. Indeed, readers embraced this new channel of communication to get in touch with the editor and the magazine's authors as well as with fellow readers.

One aspect of the communication that took place in the readers' columns was feedback on the stories that were published in the previous edition. Letters praising an individual author's work were the norm. The core content of this kind of (fan) mail was nothing more than the writer's feelings regarding how much he enjoyed the story without reflecting any more deeply on said

story's attributes. However, there were also letters whose writers went beyond simply expressing that they enjoyed a certain story. A special example are the letters of *Weird Tales* reader Gertrude Hemken, who contributed frequently to "The Eyrie," *Weird Tales'* readers' column. Hemken's lengthy letters, written in a rather eccentric style, often reviewed full issues and gave insight into how serious some readers took the stories they read. Hemken's comments on Robert E. Howard's story "Black Canaan" amply prove this:

Aaaahh! Black Canaan was also perfect, the kind one reads with eyes popping and mouth agape. Is this a form of voodoo one reads so much of, or is it something more ancient? And then I learned something more, of which I had only a smattering knowledge—that of the evil eye. Somehow I had believed the evil eye was used only on such persons as the possessor wished to harm. So—you are proving educational to me as well. (250-51)

Such reviews did more than just boost an author's esteem with the magazine's editor. Their implications went much further. The readers' letters were an improvement on another tool many pulp magazines had been using in order to learn about their customers' tastes: polls that asked readers to vote the most popular/least popular stories of each issue. A questionnaire found in each issue of *Weird Tales* stated, "[It] will help us to know what kind of stories you want in *Weird Tales* if you fill out this coupon," and asked readers to name their three favorite stories of the issue at hand and two stories they did not like. The coupon also had some space for remarks and comments. However, this space was far too small to allow writing a deeper feedback.

The readers' letters, on the other hand, were not restricted in such a manner and offered indeed in-depth feedback. They were an important indicator for the editors to know what their readers enjoyed and were much better suited to help editors decide the content of future issues. With this, the role of the reader had changed from passive customer and consumer of literature to something like a shared authorship role, the role of exerting influence on the form and content of the literature he wanted to read.

The pulp magazines did not only publish purely positive feedback. Published readers' feedback also contained at times harsh criticism: A

seventeen-year-old Robert Bloch, who would later rise to fame with his novel *Psycho* harshly criticized in the *Weird Tales* November 1934 issue Robert E. Howard's popular Conan stories.

I am awfully tired of poor old Conan the Cluck, who for the past fifteen issues has every month slain a new wizard, tackled a new monster, come to a violent sudden end that was averted [incredibly enough!] in just the nick of time, and won a new girlfriend, each of whose penchant for nudism won her a place of honor, either on the cover or on the inner illustration. [. . .] I cry: "Enough of this brute and his iron-thewed sword-thrusts-[sic] may he be sent to Valhalla to cut out paper dolls." (651)

Bloch's letter provides straightforward feedback in which he identifies all the issues he takes with the Howard's Conan stories: their formulistic plots that involve the stories' protagonist fighting supernatural enemies in the form of wizards and monsters, as well as the repetitive story elements such as Conan facing death despite it being clear from the beginning that he would never come to any harm, regardless how dire his situation was.

Bloch does not claim to represent the majority of the readers of *Weird Tales*. Nonetheless, his comment is a clear message, not only to *Weird Tales'* editor Farnsworth Wright, but also to the author of the Conan stories: the formula of this popular series had reached the point where at least one reader had become fed up with it. However, it is interesting to note that while Bloch criticizes the stories' formula, he does not go so far as to claim that the stories themselves are of low quality. Bloch rather demands of *Weird Tales* and Robert E. Howard to either be more creative with the stories' plots and settings or otherwise stop publishing a series that seems to have reached its creative end. Bloch's criticism of the Conan stories as being in accordance to one set of tired conventions is a fair one. Howard himself admitted as much in a letter to fellow *Weird Tales* writer Clark Ashton Smith that the Conan stories involved repetitive settings such as "lost cities, decaying civilizations, golden domes, marble palaces, silk-clad dancing girls" (*Collected Letters* 274).

Bloch's reproach covers not only the formulism of Howard's stories but goes even further, by complaining about the sales buffing policy of *Weird Tales* of featuring scantily dressed women on their covers and illustrations.

Although Bloch mentions no names, his criticism is directed at the cover art produced by Margret Brundage, which typically featured scantily dressed or fully naked women. However, it was not Brundage's fault that it was mostly her erotic artwork that made it on the covers of *Weird Tales*. Brundage stated in interviews that she usually drew two cover designs: one that featured a scene taken from the issue's title story without any nudity depicted and one which contained at least one "Brundage nudie." In principle, *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright picked the erotic version. Wright's choices had the effect that writers such Seabury Quinn began to write for each of his stories at least one scene that involved a naked girl, thereby hoping to raise the chances of his story making the magazine's cover page.

Although Wright's sex-sells marketing strategy may have paid out in higher sales numbers, as Bloch's letter indicates, not all of the magazine's readers, as well as some of the magazine's authors were happy about these covers. H. P. Lovecraft complained, "I don't see what the hell Mrs. Brundage's undressed ladies have to do with weird fiction!" (391-92), while one reader echoing Lovecraft's feelings wrote: "I like the sexy covers, but I will vote against them because they are misleading to those who do not know *Weird Tales*. One must mutilate the magazine before passing it on to his maiden aunt," (*Influence of Imagination* 86). In fact, in the *Weird Tales*' readers' column, many letters were published that expressed their writer's embarrassment to buy the magazine at a kiosk where due to its cover's content it was mistaken for a sex magazine.

Bloch's letter resulted in a lively discussion in the readers' column and covered both his criticism of the Conan stories as well as his objection to the cover art. It was not only the *Weird Tales* readership that participated in this debate, but also the magazine's star writers H. P. Lovecraft or Seabury Quinn, which proves how much the readers' column was a place for exchanges between the various stake holders, consisting of readers, writers and the editor, who took on the role of the moderator for these discussions.

The discussion following Bloch's letter also shows that the producers of pulp magazines actively engaged their reading consumers. However, a different aspect is noteworthy. With the readers' letters giving feedback on the quality of the stories published in the pulp magazines, a new, more basic, direct and honest form of literary criticism emerged—different from the traditional

literary criticism that was formerly only restricted to elaborate articles found in newspapers or journals that were accessible to an elite group.

Readers' Letters as Quality Control

Readers' letters also served as an additional strict quality control beyond the critical eyes of the magazines' editors. This becomes especially obvious in the readers' columns of magazines which published historical short stories. Robert Weinberg writes about *Adventure's* "The Camp-Fire" and the readers sending in letters to this column that:

[. . .] Letters from readers argued over facts in previous stories.

[. . .] [The] readers of *Adventure* weren't just arm-chair adventurers sporting theories. A typical letter began, "I enjoyed Hugh Pendexter's story about the gunfight at the O. K. Corral, but he got some of the details wrong. I was there and remember quite distinctly . . ." and continue on for three pages about the famous gun battle. (Weinberg xiii-xiv)

Robert Weinberg's point that the readers of pulp magazines were not simple layman when it came to the correct depiction of historical facts is proven by an abundance of examples in readers' letters found in various pulp magazines' letter columns. In the magazine *Oriental Stories* Robert E. Howard saw himself accused twice by readers who pointed out a seeming anachronism in one of his stories, while in case of another story, his supposedly wrong depiction of Muslims imbibing alcoholic beverages came under attack.

The result of such reader involvement showed immediate effect: it not only successfully kept away the average uninformed writer from the historic stories genre, but it encouraged the authors to put in more time-consuming research for their work in order to avoid reader's criticism. This is shown clearly in the arguably higher quality of historic stories published in the pulps. Furthermore, most historic short stories were published in high end pulp magazines. This demanded a higher literary quality in the material they accepted for publication.

Another unexpected side effect of this kind of reader involvement is evidenced in the case of Robert E. Howard: his documented fear of making

unintentional mistakes in his historic stories that might lead to reader criticism, led Howard so far as to create his very own pseudo-history as the background for the adventure stories that became the Conan of Cimmeria series. By creating his very own pseudo-history of a fictive age set between the sinking of Atlantis and the official beginning of our world's time reckoning, Howard put himself in charge of the facts of his own history. Howard's essay "The Hyborian Age," which outlined this pseudo-history, is arguably the very first pseudo-history in the field of fantastic fiction and the first case of secondary world-building in fantastic fiction based on pseudo-history. Written in 1932, it precedes the creation of J. R. R. Tolkien's fully-fledged pseudo-history of Middle-earth by several years.

Weinberg also pointed out that in the case of the *Adventure's* readers' column, not only did the readers contribute to it, but that also "authors of stories in the issues wrote long essays detailing the background of their work" (xiii-xiv). One such case was Harold Lamb, originally a historian, who had authored history books about the Crusades and a biography of Genghis Khan. Lamb's essays in the readers' column read indeed like history lessons. They are also a proof of Lamb's deep cultural understanding. This is especially important to note as pulp fiction magazines and the stories they published were usually thriving on cultural stereotypes and outright racism. On this background, a letter by Lamb, published in August 1926 in the "The Camp-Fire," is especially noteworthy. In this letter Lamb reflects on the one-sidedness of historic fiction about the Crusades, whose authors only used sources written by the Crusaders but ignored available Arabic sources. After complaining about the absurdity that certain writers try to "whitewash some individual or people and call it history" (289), moreover "without taking the trouble to get at all the facts" (289), Lamb concludes how "it's been awfully refreshing to read about the crusaders from Arabic sources" (289). Again, the implications of this letter go beyond simply demonstrating Lamb's deep understanding of history and cultural awareness. Lamb's discussion indicates that the readership of the pulp magazines consisted not, as is so often wrongly assumed, of people with hardly any education and intellectual capabilities. In fact, the publication of this elaborate historical *pensée* in the magazine's readers' column about the issue of the perception of history clearly shows that the magazine's editors knew they catered to a clientele of a surprising

intellectual sophistication.

Author Collaborations

Another feature of the era of the pulp fiction magazines are the relations between the writers working for them. E. Hoffman Price has described the solidarity among pulp fiction writers. He also mentions that contacts among writers were established via the magazine's readers' columns and by sending letters to the magazine's editors who passed on the correspondence to the addressee.

Often contacts between pulp writers began in the readers' column, with one author commenting on or praising the work of a fellow writer. Such praise for another writer's work allows several interpretations. It may indeed have been an honest expression of appreciation concerning the skills of a fellow writer. However, the same praise can also be regarded differently: due to the above-mentioned solidarity among pulp fiction writers, such praise from one author to another can also be regarded as an author's strategy to help a fellow writer's work gain the positive attention of the magazine's editor. Finally, such praise could also have had an ulterior motive, the praise being the strategy of a lesser writer to ingratiate himself with a famous writer. Regardless of the motivation, they sometimes resulted in establishing a deeper relation between writers with varying outcomes.

One example of the friendship between pulp writers that was established via the magazine both writers were working for is the relationship between Robert E. Howard and H. P. Lovecraft. In an early phase of his career, Howard had a keen interest in the Gaelic language. When he read Lovecraft's story "The Rats in the Wall," at whose end the protagonist utters a Gaelic phrase, Howard's interest was piqued and via the editor of *Weird Tales*, he contacted Lovecraft with a question concerning this phrase. This inquiry resulted in a regular exchange of letters and a friendship which lasted from 1932 until Howard's death in June 1936.

This relation between Lovecraft and Howard was more than a regular exchanging of letters and opinions ranging from literature to political and cultural topics. It also produced a playful cooperation between Lovecraft and Howard, in which another *Weird Tales* writer, Clark Ashton Smith was also involved.

H. P. Lovecraft's continuing influence on popular culture is based on two of his creations. Cthulhu—an evil alien entity from another dimension, and the *Necronomicon*, which is often mentioned in Lovecraft's stories. The *Necronomicon* is a mysterious book written by the mad Arab Al-Hazred, which supposedly contains such frightful information that anyone who reads the book will turn mad. Shortly after having established contact with Lovecraft, Howard asked where he could find a copy of this book, with Lovecraft replying that the *Necronomicon* was his own invention. From this information, an informal collaboration evolved. Howard immediately took over Lovecraft's concept of a "book within a book" and created another mysterious book in the vein of the *Necronomicon*. This time it was a German tome called *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* (which in fact is incorrect German), written by the crazy German poet von Junzt. The third member of this informal circle, Clark Ashton Smith, then added to this library the *Book of Eibon*, which naturally also contained unspeakable terror. The three authors then began to insert small references to each other's works into their stories, thereby creating a shared literary universe. Lovecraft mentioned in "The Lurking Fear" the "terrible Bran cult," referring to Howard's heroic character Bran Mak Morn. Howard returned the favor by including in his story "The Black Stone" references to Lovecraft's work. Although these mutual references were just a humorous tip of the hat between Lovecraft, Howard and Smith, attentive readers noticed them. Some readers eventually even came to believe that there was a deeper connection or truth out there.

Besides the shared universe which Lovecraft, Howard and Smith had hereby created with their "books within books" and the referencing to each other's work, there were other, more official, literary collaborations of pulp writers. One of the more famous collaborations was the round robin style story "The Challenge from Beyond," which combined the talents of writers such as Abraham Merritt ("The Moon Pool"), C. L. Moore ("Shambleau"), H. P. Lovecraft, Frank Belknap-Long and Robert E. Howard. "The Challenge from Beyond" was a collaboration based on a magazine's editor's suggestion to combine the skills of its star writers as a sales boosting attraction. As this paper focuses on natural collaborations that emerged out of the contact between authors, "The Challenge from Beyond" as a sales plot does not fall into such a category. Of more interest is another collaboration of co-authored

stories that were written by established pulp writers together with fans. Some examples are “Nymph of Darkness” and “Yvala,” both of which were co-authored by C. L. Moore, a professional pulp writer and Forrest Ackermann, who was a leading personality in the then developing fan scene. These collaborations show not only the strong influence of the readers/fans on (fantastic) pulp fiction to the point that they became co-authors, but are also a predecessor to fan fiction, in which fans write stories that are set in the secondary world of their favorite authors.

The Lovecraft Circle

Pulp writers were not lone wolves, sitting in their rooms in front of a typewriter churning out one story after another. E. Hoffman Price’s memoirs show that pulp writers very much enjoyed socializing with each other either through letters or by meeting in person. Such relations were an important way of gathering valuable information about the constantly fluctuating pulp fiction market where new magazines were being launched weekly, while at the same time an equal number of magazines went out of business. The passing on of information about upcoming publication opportunities clearly shows that the atmosphere between pulp writers was not so much one of rivalry but of collaboration. Indeed, in their get togethers, pulp writers formed discourse communities in the definition of Nicole Emmelhainz, groups that shared the same professional background and whose members were familiar with the codes and conventions of the pulp fiction business. In such a circle of likeminded and understanding members, they could exchange opinions and ideas for stories, pass on the latest information about the pulp market, and lament about their poor compensation and other worries.

Among these groups, it was the Lovecraft Circle, a group of mostly young and upcoming pulp writers, with H. P. Lovecraft at its center, which has gained special fame. Daniel Nyikos argues that the members of the Lovecraft Circle regarded themselves as part of a group of social and literary outsiders, what Nyikos calls ‘weird class,’ that used this status to experiment with various forms of fantastic fiction or, weird fiction as it was referred to in the 1930s, when fantastic fiction was still not clearly defined. Nyikos’ assessment of the outsider or literary outlaw status that the members of this group identified as is correct. This self-given status was a convenient way to boost the self-

confidence of the group's members, who were by then still far away from the fame at least some of them would get much later in their lives. Nyikos is also correct in pointing out that the group's members were experimenting with fantastic fiction. However, regarding the Lovecraft circle as a group that was exclusively dedicated to literary endeavors is not correct as the extant correspondence between its members shows in which any kind of topic, ranging from personal, private issues to political discussions was covered.

The group initially had Lovecraft at its center; a man who offered advice on writing and mediated debates within the group. Lovecraft also established connections between the individual members, which then took on their own dynamics and thereby took away Lovecraft's central position. The group disbanded after Lovecraft's death and the various members pursued different literary directions, with, for example, Robert Bloch moving towards psychological fiction and Fritz Leiber towards fantasy.

Although popular culture has created the image of the Lovecraft Circle having been a big influence on the field of fantastic literature in the early/mid-20th century, the group's influence is exaggerated: the Lovecraft Circle can be credited for having created the Cthulhu myth with members of the group writing novels or short stories—many of subpar literary quality—in which they used Lovecraft's entities from another dimension. The group's wider influence on fantastic fiction lies not so much in writing fantastic fiction but in publishing it: out of this group several important publishers of fantastic fiction emerged such as Donald A. Wollheim, who founded DAW books, which specialized in science fiction and fantasy, and nurtured several bestselling authors. Another member, August Derleth, founded the publishing company Arkham House, which worked on restoring and keeping Lovecraft's original texts in print and was also the leading small publisher of fantastic fiction.

The Fans

Pulp magazines with a focus on weird or fantastic fiction gathered an especially active group of readers whose enjoyment of the literature they read went far beyond simple entertainment commodity consumption. This again becomes obvious with a look at the readers' columns of these magazines, which were filled with letters in which readers actively debated with each other aspects of magazine content.

Readers also contacted their favorite authors by sending letters to the magazine that published their stories, generating at times unexpected results. In one case, two readers of Robert E. Howard's Conan stories composed a detailed timeline that depicted the hero in each story at a different age and stage of his life; they then sent this production to Howard. Howard was impressed by this chronological timeline, constructed on the basis of scant hints in the stories. Years after Howard's death, when the Conan stories were published in chronological order, they were supplemented by additional tales written by other authors. These supplemental tales were based on this fan produced timeline. Arguably, these fans' work evinced the corporate/common ownership of a pulp hero like Conan, the creation of both an originating writer and engaged readers.

The communication between readers was taken to a new level when in 1926 Hugo Gernsback's first science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories* began publishing the full addresses of letter writers. Now fans could skip the magazines and communicate directly with each other, they could locate likeminded fans in their immediate environment and so even meet in person. With this, the first step was taken towards an organized fandom.

One of the new dynamics that came along with this development was fan generated publications, also known as fanzines. The concept of privately produced amateur publications with small circulations was actually not new. David E. Schultz traces the origins of amateur fan publications back to 19th century literary groups in the United States which formed amateur press associations to publish collections of amateur fiction and poetry. H. P. Lovecraft was an especially prominent member of such an amateur press association. When the various pulp magazines' readers' columns published letter writers' addresses, this helped significantly to establish correspondence networks between fans. As a side effect of this, more professional amateur publications and fanzines, emerged.

One such fanzine was *The Fantasy Fan*, published by 16-year-old Charles Hornig. What made *The Fantasy Fan* so important is the fact that it found the support of star pulp fiction authors such as H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard and others. These writers even gave Hornig stories to publish. Moreover, Lovecraft even published his influential essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" in *The Fantasy Fan*.

This support by star writers to a fan publication clearly shows how much the pulp fiction magazines were influential in the realm of literature at large. Readers/consumers/fans received direct attention of their favorite writers. In the fanzines, writers had an extra forum to reach their readers outside of readers' columns of the magazines which published their stories. Moreover, the exchange in the fanzines between authors and fans was free from any editorial censorship or the politics of the magazines' readers' columns, allowing for more open and unfiltered communication. One downside, however, can be gleaned in an interview for *The Fantasy Fan* where Clark Ashton Smith unintentionally destroyed the illusion of Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*, Howard's *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* and Smith's own *Book of Eibon* being real existing tomes by admitting that all these books were fiction. In the readers' column of a magazine such as *Weird Tales* such a blunder would without any doubt never have happened.

The Fantasy Fan is also an excellent example that demonstrates how fan culture and mentality has not changed much since its very beginnings. In *The Fantasy Fan*, the readers debated their favorite genres and authors in a highly emotional way, at times also full of vitriol. In the first edition of *The Fantasy Fan*, editor Hornig established the column "The Boiling Point," which was intended to stir lively debates. The first contribution by *uberfan* Forrest Ackermann took efficiently care of this by calling out Clark Ashton Smith and his prose as being horror stories that should not have any place in a 'scientifiction' magazine. The following very harsh reaction of other readers disagreeing with Ackermann's opinion, spiced with personal insults, reads not so differently from what can be found in 2020 on various internet forums where similar issues are debated.

What this episode also shows is that fans had noticed that there were subgenres in the broad literary field of what was then loosely termed weird fiction and which covered genres such as horror, fantasy and science fiction. Furthermore, it was not only the fans who debated this issue in an aggressive manner. Even the authors of such literature became involved as they could follow and engage in such debates. In this way, another new kind of literary discourse community was established: fandom.

Conclusion

This paper described the dynamics in the relations between authors and

readers in the American pulps of the early 20th century. It clarified these dynamics by showcasing the influence and results of the introduction of readers' columns in American pulp fiction magazines. It also established that the pulp magazines had a strong influence on how popular and mass literature was produced and consumed in interwar print culture.

The pulps manifested three novelties: a new kind of professional writer, who wrote stories as an artist, but also as a businessman who needed to sell the product of his labor; a new kind of readership with a different educational and social background than the traditional reader, and a new way of how literature was consumed. These novelties generated amongst disparate discourse communities, a network of relations and interactions between readers and writers.

The novelty platform for these communications was the readers' columns in the pulp magazines which were introduced in 1912. These columns changed the readers' role from passive consumers to active participants involved in the decision-making process of the content of the pulp magazines via letters sent directly to the magazines' editors or addressed to the readers' columns. Such readers' letters giving feedback on the quality of the stories found in the pulp magazines were a new, more honest form of literary criticism—different from the traditional literary criticism that was formerly restricted to journals that were only accessible to an elite group.

Another effect of the pulp magazines' readers' columns was that they connected not only the readers/fans but also pulp fiction writers. This led to the founding of informal circles or groups of writers, that served as a place for exchanging information on the pulp market and discussing literature. These circles were also a place where young upcoming writers could learn from their professional peers, with some of them becoming professionals in Hollywood or postwar television production. Moreover, out of these circles influential publishers, like DAW Books and Arkham House, also emerged.

The publishing of the full address of letter writers to the readers' columns, starting in 1926, not only made a direct communication between readers possible, but it also led to fan activities such as semi-professionally produced fanzines, like *The Fantasy Fan*. Therefore, the simple choice to publish the address of the letter writer to a readers' column led to the organized fandom as it is known today.

Indeed, the pulps had changed literature and turned it into an entertainment form accessible to a wider group of readers. Moreover though, the pulps had connected its readers to its writers, generating various forms of communication channels that reached beyond the pages of the magazines.

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